

## THE WORLD BELOW IN GREEK FOLKTALES

In Greek folktales we very often hear of a «World Below», and the first part of this paper I devote to what is meant by this expression. I note that in the very first story I adduce we are very explicitly told that this «World Below» is not the world of the dead, although sometimes this idea may seem to play a part; but this is rare. That the World Below and the world of the dead are quite independent ideas at once separates our subject from the laments over the dead, the *μοιρολόγια*, which are such a characteristic and beautiful feature of Greek popular poetry. This clearly cut statement that the World Below has nothing to do with the souls of the departed comes in a story from Astypalaia, to which the title *The Arts of Solomon*, *Ἡ Σολομωνιστή*, has been given<sup>1</sup>. We hear of a poor barber enticed away from home into the service of a Jew. So far the story is entirely of this world, and all I need note is that in these stories Jews, like dervishes, are apt to be rather sinister people, often of magical power. The Jew presently brought him across a lake, magically bridged by throwing handfuls of chaff upon the water, and it is at this point that the story passes into a kind of fairyland. By a slip in his magic arts the Jew, and not the barber, was turned to stone. The barber then met a crowd of girls who were the attendants and servants of a magical, talismanic chandelier. But the barber became tired of such a life, and began to miss his wife, whom he had left behind in the world of men. Then the girls of the chandelier brought him up again into the World Above — *᾽ς τὸν ἀπάνω κόσμον* — but in what way we are not told: of the lake there is no mention, and this «into the World Above» is the first indication that by crossing the lake the hero had got into a «World Below». But that he had is brought out very clearly in a dialogue between himself and his wife, when they met again in the upper world. His wife had a woman's natural suspicion about where he had been and whence had

---

<sup>1</sup> Dieterich, *Sprache und Volksüberlieferungen d. Süd. Sporaden*, p. 504.

come all the treasures he had with him. Here I quote the text : She said : «And where have you come from?» — «I am coming», said he, from the World Below». — «What ? From Hades ?» — «No, not from Hades ; that is where the dead are.» — «Then from where ?» Her husband said : «From the other place ; the men there are all alive.» — «Where is this place ?» — «Down below, but I don't know how to get there.» The text goes on to say that the barber told her the whole story and with the girls from the chandelier to serve and amuse them he and his wife lived very happily.

I have elsewhere pointed out that all these Greek stories, if we set aside the gnostic, the Wit and Wisdom stories, show a certain development, which I must think is not typological only but has a certain historical, genetic validity<sup>1</sup>. The series seems to begin with the entirely fairy story, which in later years, as people became less simple, has come in the main to interest children only : witness the frequency of such stories among the Greeks of Cappadocia, where storytelling had sunk to being little more than an amusement for children. But in stories told to amuse grown up people the fairy element was gradually pushed aside, becoming more and more subordinate, until we reach a stage when the story becomes a real novel, a narrative exclusively of what is possible, or at least seemed to the audience credible. But before this final stage we have stories of a mixed kind, which I find it convenient to call Fairy Romances. In these the narrative begins, and commonly ends, in the world of men, but in its development makes excursions into fairyland : the manner of marking such excursions is the final topic of this paper.

The story which I have just been quoting from Astypalaia is very much of this mixed kind, a fairy romance. The story begins in this world with the poor barber, and is presently transferred into the realm of fancy, of magic ; into a world where nothing is impossible. To this unreal world our barber is carried across a lake by the Jewish magician. Then, by some way not stated, he is brought back by the girls of the chandelier and resumes his normal human life.

At this point I note that the Astypalaia story has a very close parallel in a story from Kos, which I have called *The Boy and the Box*<sup>2</sup>. There are further parallels in Crete and in Samos and

<sup>1</sup> Dawkins, *Forty-five Stories from the Dodekanese*, p. 5 ; and *Modern Greek Folktales*, p. XXIX.

<sup>2</sup> *Forty-five Stories*, p. 411, with references.

in Pontos ; indeed the story seems widely spread in Greece, although it is only in the Astypalaia version that the actual phrase «the World Below» occurs. The point I would make here is that in *The Boy and the Box* — the box plays the part of the talismanic chandelier in the Astypalaia story — the hero is equally removed from the world of reality, not this time by crossing a lake, but by passing through a mountain, which opens and then is to close again. In this way inside the mountain he finds the magic box, but he has been tempted to delay, and when he wants to get back, it is too late : the mountain has closed again. Then he has a further passage into an underground unreality by scrambling down a mysterious hole in the ground. This brings him out on the sea shore and to two fantastic adventures. In the first he is adopted and then disowned by the caprice of a rich man who happened to be passing that way in his yacht ; in the second he is turned into an ass and back again from this fantastic life to being a man again, returning seemingly into the real world, where by the aid of the box he lives in great prosperity. In a Turkish variant he finds his way into the magic land by being carried to the top of a mountain of jewels. Of this «Sindbad the Sailor» incident I shall have something to say presently.

Let us now look at another story, *The Underworld Marriage*<sup>1</sup>. We have a girl who passed from this world into the World Below ; this she did by accidentally finding a flight of stairs leading down under the earth, or in a version from Mykonos by going down into a well or cistern to retrieve her bucket, and from it passing by a door or window into the World Below. There, herself unseen, she saw a lady behaving to her husband with the greatest cruelty, and then surrendering herself to a negro lover. The girl was so angry and so much scandalized that she pelted the lady and put out her eyes. Then she returned to the World Above, to which the husband also found his way. He met the girl and took her down into the World Below and there they stayed as husband and wife. A fairy romance has its ending in fairyland.

And this same ending we find in a Cretan story<sup>2</sup>. A woman had a husband from the World Below, who could take the form of an eagle. He was so much vexed by his wife's jealousy that he flew back

<sup>1</sup> Modern Greek Folktales, p. 259, with references.

<sup>2</sup> 'Επετ. 'Εταιρ. Κρητικῶν Σπουδῶν, III, 320.



into the lower world. Like Psyche searching for Cupid, his wife found her way to him; they were reconciled and stayed together in the World Below.

This land of magical unreality we have now found entered by the hero being carried across a lake by some sinister personage, or by his scrambling down a hole in the ground, or by his going down a flight of stairs or down into a cistern, or by being carried, Sindbad fashion, up a Mountain of Jewels. The stairs leading down appear also in a story from Thrace about the pursuit after the Fair One of the World<sup>1</sup>. That she belongs to a world hidden down below we are clearly given to understand, because the successful wooer found her in the last of forty rooms in a palace reached by going down forty steps below her father's throne. Even her father's country is very much removed from reality, because the hero has to reach it in a magic ship, which is moved not by wind and sails but by some enchantment.

A less usual way of entering what we may take as an equivalent of the World Below is in a story from Sourmena in Pontos: the hero is carried by a wooden horse into «another world»<sup>2</sup>, — "Ἐφερεν ἄτονα ὅς ἕνα ἕτερο κόσμο.

Another relevant story comes from Naxos<sup>3</sup>. A likely and promising boy, very good at his books, was to be married to the princess, but a rival at court arranged with a wizard that on his wedding day he should be done away with: the word used, ν' ἀνεμοσκονιστῇ, that he should be scattered like dust to the winds, brings at once to our minds the whirlwind which in the Thracian version carries the girl to the palace of the Prince in a Swoon: a story I shall discuss later. Meanwhile our present story from Naxos is worded a little inconsistently; after using the word «scattered like dust to the winds», it is explained that the boy was caused to lose his way and by the usual flight of stairs found himself trapped in the World Below; there he found some humble employment. Presently he met three wizards, who helped him to find the stairs again and gave him letters to a kindly wizard in the Upper World. Here the princess recognized him and the story has the usual happy ending.

<sup>1</sup> Θρηκικά, XVI, 130.

<sup>2</sup> Ἀρχεῖον Πόντου, III, 88.

<sup>3</sup> Νεοελληνικά Ἀνάλεκτα, II, 53.

I now turn to a story which I have called *Human Flesh to eat*<sup>1</sup>. Of this I have found seven versions ranging from Zakynthos to the Cyclades. A blackamoor, or a pasha, or some strange monster, proposed his love to three sisters one after the other : his condition was that the girl should eat a piece of human flesh. The first two refused ; the youngest by a cunning trick made the lover believe that she had eaten the horrid morsel, and so she went off with her gruesome husband. The story then either gives her rescue from the demon, or it developes along the lines of Cupid and Psyche, the husband behind his horrible disguise playing the part of Cupid. In a version from Melos the girl after losing her husband is reunited to him, and they go off together and reign in the World Below, rather like Pluto and Persephone. Indeed the Melian version, taken by itself, might well be called *The Lord of the World Below*.

Here is the place for a very widely spread story, *The Underworld Adventure*<sup>2</sup>. In pursuit of a man or of an ogre who had been stealing his father's apples, the hero was guided to a cistern, down in which he found a beautiful girl. She warned him that his brothers would not play fair, and instead of drawing him up out of the well would leave him there. She then gave him as tokens of love three nuts, each containing a wonderful dress : one embroidered with the sky and the stars ; the second with the earth and its flowers ; and the third with the sea and in it all the fish. At this point the hero came upon two sheep, one black and one white : by ill luck he mounted the wrong sheep, the black one, and was carried down into the World Below. Here he won the favour of the king, who wanted to marry him to his daughter. But the youth did not forget his first love, and begged that he might be allowed to return to the World Above. For this he was given a fleet of eagles with the food they would need. When he was very nearly at the end of the way, the food failed and he gave the eagle on whom he was riding a piece cut from his own leg. So he just reached the World Above, and there he found his leg restored and married the girl, with nothing said about the princess whom he had left in the World Below.

To the next story I have already alluded : *The Prince in a Swoon*<sup>3</sup>. It was a girl's fate to marry a dead man, and what is

<sup>1</sup> Modern Greek Folktales, p. 89.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 140.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 175, with references.

meant by a dead man is, as the story shows us, a man who had to all appearances passed through the gate of death. The girl came to a castle and in it found a youth lying in a deathlike swoon. By his bed there was a writing : he would marry whatever girl could keep watch over him for so many months, days, and hours. This the girl started to do, but at the critical moment, just before he was due to wake, a crafty black woman had been allowed for a moment to take her place ; when the prince woke up, it was she he married and not the girl who had watched over him for so long. Then after his marriage he had to go on a journey, and he asked his household, including the rejected girl, what presents he should bring back for them. The girl asked for a Rope of Hanging, a Knife of Slaughter, and a Stone of Patience. Her husband overheard her talking to these enigmatic gifts and asking them what use she should make of them. The Rope said : «Hang yourself» ; the Knife said : «Kill yourself» ; oddly enough not «Kill h i m» ; and the Stone said : «Endure all patiently». The prince then saw his error and the girl was restored to her rightful place.

The special reason why I adduce this story is that there is a suspicion that the prince's castle is in some way a counterpart to the World Below of other stories. The girl never comes to it in any ordinary way. In the version from Athens she is carried there by an eagle ; in a Thracian version she is brought there by a whirlwind ; in the versions from Skopelos and Naxos and Epeiros we have the whirlwind in a modified form : the girl is forced to take refuge from a storm of rain. Always, I observe, in some violent way that she is unable to resist. The important point is that all these are precisely the ways by which people enter what in other stories is expressly called the World Below. And that the castle is indeed somewhere below ground appears in the version from Athens, in which we are told that the girl was carried by the eagle down into a deep well, and down in the well was the prince. Then when the girl was so foolish as to want a companion in her watch, likely candidates stooped and looked down into the well so that she could see them. In a much confused version from Chios the prince is presented as living down in a well. And passing down into a well or cistern we have seen is a recognized way into the World Below.

To resume my position. We have seen that the mysterious region identified more or less closely with a World Below is approached in various ways : by a flight of stairs leading down ; by way of a hole



in the ground ; by an opening in the side of a well or cistern ; a man is snatched away by a whirlwind or carried down by mounting a black, when he should have mounted a white sheep ; or by being carried there on the back of a wooden horse. The passage into this other world is always by an action which is at least in part involuntary : the steps or the sides of the hole prescribe his movements ; often he is simply snatched away by violence. Sometimes he returns to the world of men ; sometimes he is to live forever in the other world.

These passages of transition do not occur only when the hero is expressly to enter the World Below. In many stories their function would be better phrased rather differently, and in more general terms : they are inserted at the point in the narrative when any more fantastic part of the story begins, whether it is located in the World Below or not. For instance : I have mentioned as such a transitional episode the hero being sewn up in the skin of an animal and carried up to the top of the Mountain of Jewels. This same episode occurs in a story which I have called *The Mountain of Jewels and the Dove-Maiden*<sup>1</sup>. In the first part of the story there is nothing of the fairyland kind : the hero simply enters the service of a Jew who for his own purposes wants him to bring down jewels from the top of the mountain. But with the involuntary ascent of the mountain we enter fairyland, and hear of the adventures of the hero with the dove-maidens and his marriage with one of them. After the arrival on the top of the mountain there is a second episode of transition of a kind we have already seen. To reach the palace of the Dove-Maidens the hero has to go down a staircase, the entrance to which is as usual covered by a stone. «He went down and down ; forty, then fifty steps ; I don't know how many», and then at the bottom he found the palace, a fairy palace, clearly in the World Below.

In a story from Skyros, which I have called *The young Man and his three Friends*<sup>2</sup>, the narrative by an episode of transition enters fairyland, and later without notice the hero is brought back into the world of men. The story has a quite realistic opening. The hero went with his mother to the mountain where she was cutting fire wood. Then he lost himself in a magic castle to

<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p. 104.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 270, taken from Madame Perdiká's, Skyros, Nos 25 and 26.

which his mother could find no entrance, nor could he get out to her : the doors into and out from fairyland are, we see, tightly closed. Then the boy set out on his adventures by which he won wives for his three friends, and at last himself attained to the love of the Fair One of the World, living in her castle «at the very edge of the world», in the Wood of the Golden Boughs. But he is too young to stay forever in fairyland. By her marriage to a mortal, his wife had ceased to be a spirit of the air — ἔπαψε νῆν' ἀερικὸν — and had become a Greek woman, and with her natural sense had recognized that her Johnnie, though madly in love with her, must sometimes have a change ; he must go and mix with other men and with them go hunting, lest his health fail, he shut up always in the tower. So she transported the Golden Wood and the tower and the garden, all of them, to where men dwell in this world. Only much later at the end of all their adventures did she move everything back into the fairyland where they belonged. In this way of treating the magic land of delight there is always visible a strong vein of common sense, very different from what I think is to be seen in the parallels in European legend, where romantic feeling is very much less tempered by practical reason.

Another idea strikes me : in these episodes of transition we have I think a key to the meaning of the nonsense preludes, which though they don't appear much in Greece, are so fully developed in Turkish stories. I quote the opening of one of Kunos's stories from Ada Kale, the Turkish island in the Danube<sup>1</sup>. It begins thus : «A thing there was and a thing there was not ; in the days of old there was many a king ; and in the days of old the sieve was inside the kettle». Then after this nonsense the real story begins : «There was a king and he had one son», and so on. Sometimes the nonsense goes on much longer ; sometimes we have no more than «A thing there was and a thing there was not», and then the story proper begins. Greek examples hardly go beyond such a formula as : «The Turks were keeping Ramazan ; with a hole in the pot and a hole on the pan»<sup>2</sup>. This is enough to tell the auditors that they are not to look for cold sense and literal truth in the story just about to begin.

---

<sup>1</sup> Kunos, Türkische Volksmärchen aus Adakale, No. II. See also Halliday in my *Modern Greek in Asia Minor*, p. 220.

<sup>2</sup> *Modern Greek Folktales*, p. 105, is an example.



In general ; the use of these episodes of transition is, I take it, equivalent to the narrator pausing in his story and saying to his auditors : «Now ; here we depart from the common world of prose, of what you see every day, and I mean to carry you into quite another world, a world of fairyland and fancy». To the concrete imagination of the Greek this world needs to be localized, but at the same time inaccessible. To this problem a common solution has been to regard it as tucked away somewhere underground, and calling it vaguely the World Below. We have seen that in one story, *Human Flesh to eat*, this world may have not unnaturally a strong touch of the ancient Greek Hades, but this is to my mind an exception : as the barber in the *Astypalaia* story says, the men in it are all alive. I would rather suggest that the World Below of these stories is the Greek version of what is to be found in so very many European stories and legends. It is the land to which the Queen of Elfland carried away True Thomas, or the land to which the Monk Felix was rapt away for three hundred years, while he seemed to be but for a few hours listening to the bird singing in the garden <sup>1</sup>. Any number of parallels could be cited. Can it be compared to the Hill of Venus, to the hidden centre of which Tannhäuser penetrated ? Perhaps it can be, but always with one very real difference. The Hill of Venus was a place of sin, of the sins of the old pagan world, surviving, though always reprobated, into the Christian age. The World Below of Greek story is a place of happiness, of innocent happiness. It is not a place opposed to Christian ideas, for it has never heard of them : it belongs to a world before the Galilaean, and in popular imagination has survived His coming.

To pursue this idea through the folklore of other countries would carry me too far. Yet I may perhaps allow myself to give an Arabian parallel from a still unpublished story sent to me lately by my friend Major C. G. Campbell, who recorded it from an Arab refugee in Beirut. The story is on the general lines of *The Son of the Hunter* <sup>2</sup>, in which the hero is sent out on a series of quests. In this Arab version we have him helped by a magic horse : and how does he find the horse, by whom he is carried into a fairyland of adventure ? Tied

---

<sup>1</sup> See F. J. Child, *The English and Scottish popular Ballads*, No 37, Thomas Rymer, with references.

<sup>2</sup> For which see my *Modern Greek Folktales*, p. 263, and *Forty-five Stories*, p. 71.

to the end of a rope, the hero is let down into a well, and at the bottom of the well he goes through a door, and so comes to a gold and marble stable and in it is the horse by means of whom he is able to carry out all the demands made upon him. The well and the door in its side we have already met in the Greek story of *The Underworld Marriage*, and the horse is the wooden horse in the story I have quoted above from Pontos.

That the numerous caves in Greece have anything much to do with all this I cannot agree. A man may go down into a cave, but all he can expect to find is more cave. What he comes to after one of these episodes of transition is a world very like our own, except that it is relieved of the dull facts of commonsense and of everyday life.

It would equally be beyond the scope of this paper to hunt about in literature for similar episodes of transition. Yet perhaps room may be found for two examples. *Alice in Wonderland* is a book, ostensibly for children, first published in 1865 by a mathematician at Oxford, who chose to call himself Lewis Carroll. In countless editions it is now well known over all the English-reading world. The little heroine finds her way into this land of wonders very much like the hero of *The Boy and the Box*. She came upon a rabbit-hole; and then we are told: «The rabbit-hole went straight on like a tunnel for some way and then dipped suddenly down, so suddenly that Alice had not a moment to think about stopping herself; she found herself falling down what seemed to be a very deep well». And at the bottom of the well there was a long passage, and by it Alice came to a wonderful house full of locked doors, with the last door leading her into a beautiful garden. Can there be anything more like the Greek entry into an underground world of wonders?

So far for an example from the West. My other parallel is drawn from the furthest East. In the 17th century a Chinese writer, Cheng-En, wrote a story called simply *Monkey*<sup>1</sup>. It is an account of a fundamentally quite historical expedition sent from China to India to fetch Buddhist texts. One of the envoys is the Monkey who gives the book its name: half a sage and half a mischievous buffoon. The whole narrative is as full of fancies and symbols as that of Alice

---

<sup>1</sup> English translation by Arthur Waley. See also his *The real Tripitaka*.

in Wonderland, though the envoys find their way into this land, not like Alice and the Greek heroes, by going through a hole in the ground, but by coming to a cascade on the side of a mountain and passing through the curtain of falling water. Both Cheng-En and the Oxford mathematician felt the need of a definite symbol of transition, as the story passed from the world of fact into the world of imagination and fancy.

This conception of a tunnel by which a man may pass from this world into another I once met with not in literature of any kind but in a work of plastic art. This was in Ireland. I was once shown over a garden that had been laid out some time before the first Great War by a Japanese gardener. In this garden the walks, the little ponds, the streams, and the bridges, even I was told the plants, had been designed as symbols of what may befall a man, good or evil, in his passage through life. The path through all its windings led at last to a seat on the top of a hillock, from which one could survey the whole garden, as a man may look back on the adventures of his life. At the foot of the hillock, full in view in a wood of miniature trees, was a tiny toy village, in which the man may have lived till the time came for him to retire to the hermitage on the top of the hill. The entrance to the garden was not by any door or gate; the visitor had to pass through a dark tunnel — let us call it a symbol of birth — like Alice entering wonderland, or the hero of a Greek folktale passing down by the hole or by the flight of stairs into the World Below. When I was there the gardener was dead, and no one knew more than the general idea of the garden; the details had all been forgotten. It would surely have been the greatest triumph of the artist if a visitor, without having to be told, perceived the significance of the tunnel, of the several blind paths that led nowhere, of the straight paths, and finally of the outlook hill, just as by living tradition the listeners to these Greek stories will have perceived the meaning of these episodes of transition, by which they are carried from this world into fairyland, like the visitor to the Irish garden, as he passes through the tunnel from the workaday world to the somehow very other yet very real world of the artist's imagination.

R. M. DAWKINS